

Notes from June 13th Collaborative Field Trip to Potential White Pine Project Area

These notes will be posted to the project website.

Attendees

- 7 members of the Shoshone-Benewah Forest Health Collaborative (SBFHC)
 - Karen Roetter, US Senator Mike Crapo; Sid Smith, US Senator James Risch; Reid Ahls, Idaho Forest Group; Mike Peterson, The Lands Council; Dean Johnson, Pam Secord; Peggy Carver
- 1 representative of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe
 - Nathan Albrecht, Fish and Wildlife Biologist
- Forest Service employees attending: Stefani Spencer, Palouse District Ranger; Stephanie Israel, Project Team Leader; Dan Kenney, Fisheries; Eric Crook, Soils, Drea Traeumer, Hydrology, Amanda Villwock, Silviculture; Miles Spong, Timber; Lisa Spinelli, Alan Carlson, Wes Duncan – Fire/Fuels; Shawn Dietrich, Recreation; Heather Wethington, Engineering; Emily Poor, Botany

General Overview

Attendees met up at the Palouse Divide Ski Parking Area on Hwy 6, followed by introductions and an overview of agenda. Five stops were planned, with 1 identified as happening only if time permitted. The following notes capture discussion topics that occurred at each stop. The purpose of the field trip was for everyone to get an idea of the existing conditions and potential proposed action in the project area, demonstrate what areas could look like after treatment and provide another opportunity for those participating in the collaborative process to help identify potential issues early in the process and get to know more about each other.

Stop #1 (Project area overlook, top of Divide on Rd #377)

District Fire Management Officer, Lisa Spinelli, gave an overview of project area highlighting past reforestation efforts (regeneration harvest accomplished via *seed tree* prescription in early 2000s followed by site prep fuels treatment, replanted in 2011 w/ larch + ponderosa pine) visible within the project area. Lisa explained how the past management efforts visible from this area were successful, especially given the typically harsher conditions of the site w/ greater exposure to wind, etc. due to elevation and open exposure. The overlook provided an opportunity to orient people to the project area based on topographic features, as you can see much of the major watershed.

Stop #2 (Road # 3833, just north of Benewah and Latah county boundary in Sec 27 of project area)

Zone Silviculturist, Amanda Villwock, explained her process for determining appropriate silvicultural prescriptions based on desired vegetative conditions related to species dominance type, structural stage (size of trees), and land type groups/ disturbance regimes and the most current scientific information available. (Handout provided in participant packet, attached.) This area provided another opportunity to compare past management area with those potentially proposed for treatment within the White Pine project. She also

discussed the white pine blister rust disease and the need/ intention to plant blister rust resistant seedlings where shifting species composition to more resilient, early seral species is desired.

She also discussed the current insect & disease issues and considerations of patch sizes as they relate the historic fire regimes. Mike Peterson posed the question about the fire return interval of more frequent, low-intensity fire regimes and how we will factor that into our considerations for proposed treatment. Fuels work being on done on the Colville re: variable density thinning, may be pertinent to consider – Mike will provide literature/ reference to Amanda for consideration.

Question was asked as to whether the FS ever has, or if it could be appropriate to, harvest remaining “leave trees” in overstory from past management areas once the understory is regenerating as desired? Amanda explained that there would need to be a clear purpose and need to do so and that it is not typical – but it could be something to explore in the future if/where objectives (i.e. old growth retention/ recruitment) are being met.

Emily Poor, USFS Botany intern, explained rare plants surveys in the project area have been conducted and will be used to determine areas where we would avoid and/or minimize impact by buffering to ensure we will not have an adverse effect on these plant species.

Stop #3 (Top of Hangman Creek drainage, Sec 9, NW corner of project area)

There are known concerns with TMDL in streams within the Hangman Creek drainage. The proposed actions within the headwaters of this watershed were of concern to the CDA Tribe given potential impact to fisheries downstream and heavy harvest on neighboring land ownerships. Although native redband trout are not present within the streams located in the project area, they do occur downstream within the watershed. Nathan Albrecht explained the main concern with potential harvest in this area revolved around the size of streamside buffers, however the USFS standard of 300’ would be more than sufficient to appease their concern as it goes beyond the Idaho Forest Practices Act buffers.

The desired vegetative condition in this area still needs to be determined/ verified by Silviculturist before potential treatment to best meet the purpose and need will be proposed. This area is of the highest priority for fuels treatment according to USFS fire/fuels specialists as the area is within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and will require treatment to address hazardous fuels and make stand more resilient to insect and disease activity. Consensus from all participants that fuels removal would be allowable, given 300’ buffers.

Several examples of previous fuels treatments were discussed in vehicles as we drove through them just prior to the stop.

Stop #4 (Road #328, Southern end of project area; near edge of Sec 2 and Sec 3; ½ mile section)

A ½ mile section of potential roadside fuels treatment within a riparian habitat conservation area (RHCA) has been identified by the fuels shop as a high concern due to combination of extremely dense ladder fuel buildup and human behavior associated with high recreation use/ travel corridor lending to potential increased risk of human-caused ignition (i.e. tossed cigarette butt or sparks from dragging chains). Alan Carlson, District Fuels Assistant Fire Management Officer, explained the desire to remove <5” DBH fuels, by hand – no machines, to

reduce the fuel buildup within this area. Fisheries Biologist, Dan Kenney, stated his concerns over the proposed treatment as it is not typical/ standard per the INFISH/ PACFISH direction as adopted by the Clearwater Forest Plan. Larger discussion ensued as to the potential trade-offs of doing nothing and risking a high-intensity wildlife within the RHCA, versus treating within the RHCA to reduce the likelihood of unwanted fire. Stephanie Israel explained the project planning process requires an Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) of specialists to consider potential impacts from the proposed action within all required regulatory guidelines and present that information to the Responsible Official (in this case, Forest Supervisor, Cheryl Probert) who considers the IDT recommendations/ information before approving the proposed actions. Israel posed a direct question to all member of the SBFHC and the CDA Tribe as to whether or not they could see the need and would support proposed treatment as explained by Alan Carlson, and all external planning participants were in favor of “trying” the treatment, encouraging the FS to not be myopic” but rather “consider the 30,000 foot level”. The IDT will likely include in the fuels treatment within the RHCA as part of the proposed action at scoping to see gauge general public support, and continue work to ensure compliance with regulations.

Group was curious as to how the botanical issues could be affected by treating RHCAs, as Emily explained at Stop #2 that many rare plants occur within riparian areas. Requested botanist attend the next SBFHC meeting to further explain potential concerns/ impacts to rare plants in this area.

Shawn Dietrich, Recreation technician, explained the desire and need to decommission some user-created trails near this area for resource protection. He also stated he understands the desire for access between popular dispersed recreation areas– and therefore would also like to propose development of a more mutually beneficial trail system to the reduce negative impacts to the resource but still allowing user access. Planning participants did not have any major issues, so long as access was not completely removed.

It should be noted that this particular location of the potential project area is within Latah County. Similar discussions with the Latah County Commissioners and/or representatives are to occur and continue throughout the planning process.

Non-stop #5 (Roadside vegetation conditions along White Pine Scenic Byway)

Stephanie Israel asked participants, in the essence of time, to pay attention to the vegetative conditions along the Scenic Byway and how the group would feel about potential treatment in the area given visual quality and the potential need to maintain or increase old growth along the roadside.

Participants were encouraged to bring ideas to next collaborative meeting in July in advance of scoping in August. Stephanie will share the notes from field trip, maps, and handouts with the participants to share with other collaborative members who were not able to attend so they may have a chance to review and identify additional questions/ concerns prior to scoping in August. The SBFHC participants requested a botany representative attend the July meeting for further discussion re: possible fuels treatment in RHCA.